

Summary of Public Comment on Alternatives

Public input is a key element in comprehensive conservation planning. We are committed to involving refuge visitors, neighbors, the business community, farmers, other government units, and others interested in the Refuge's future. In September 2001, we mailed out 1,400 copies of a project update that described the planning process and four concepts that we were considering as preliminary management alternatives. Copies of the update were also available at the Refuge. People were invited to voice their thoughts on these alternatives either through e-mail or letters. We received approximately 39 messages through e-mail, 62 individual letters and 527 form letters, some of which included individual comments. We also received a petition with 485 names.

We have summarized people's comments in the following paragraphs.

Comments in Support of Each Alternative

Alternative A

Many of the people who wrote letters or e-mail in support of Alternative A described themselves as supporting the original charter that established the Refuge in 1947. The relationship of the Refuge's four purposes -- conservation of wildlife and development of agriculture, recreation, industrial and related purposes -- was described as "symbiotic" by some writers. Some supporters said that the combined purposes are dependent upon one another and that decreasing any particular existing use would have ramifications for other uses. Several writers noted the importance of Crab Orchard Lake and industry on the Refuge to the local economy. Some supporters of Alternative A said that change is unnecessary because existing uses have not been detrimental to wildlife or water quality.

Some people said that they supported Alternative A because they had reservations about the ability of Southern Illinois University to manage the resource.

Personal history with Crab Orchard Lake's recreational amenities was a factor in much of the support for Alternative A. Some individuals described the Refuge as a "heritage" and "way of life." Memories of gathering with family and friends at the Crab Orchard Boat and Yacht Club were frequently cited by individuals supporting this alternative. Some people described camping and boating as contributing to their love for nature and appreciation for wildlife, and they expressed a desire for the same opportunities to be available to their children and grandchildren. Individuals who are retired said that the Refuge is an affordable destination that provides pleasant scenery, good fishing, and companionship with other retired people. Older people and women also noted that the Crab Orchard Boat and Yacht Club is a place where they feel safe camping. Other people said they appreciate the alcohol-free environment of the Club.

Some individuals said that their support of Alternative A is partly a response to past public use restrictions and their perception that this alternative would lead to fewer restrictions than the other

alternatives. In the same vein, some people supported the alternative and the concept of opening areas that have been closed. One writer said that prairie restoration is not occurring and supports returning more fields to grain crops and grazing.

The events of September 11, 2001, were on the minds of some of the people who wrote in support of Alternative A. Some individuals said that in an uncertain world, the community needs jobs and security, and thus needs to retain industry and existing recreational facilities at the Refuge.

Variations on Alternative A:

Individuals who overall support Alternative A also described various changes in current management that they would like to see implemented. Some said that what they called “high impact recreation” such as jet skis, all-terrain vehicles and “excessively powered” engines should be banned from the Refuge. Some supported greater emphasis on low-impact recreation activities such as hiking, sightseeing and photography, and limiting hunting to specific areas to avoid conflict with other activities.

Some people said that facilities such as boat ramps, rest rooms, roads, and electrical service should be improved in church camps and campgrounds. It was suggested that the beach and facilities at Carterville Beach be restored; another writer said that beaches in general should be opened up and maintained for public swimming. One individual suggested that the Refuge should increase the number of law enforcement and maintenance positions on the Refuge.

Some people who support Alternative A suggested that if the Service ultimately decides on the alternative involving a land exchange, the Crab Orchard Boat and Yacht Club should not be included in the exchange. Individuals espousing this opinion said that the club does not present a great deal of cost to the Service and provides funding through annual lease fees.

Another writer stated that new recreational opportunities should be allowed on Devil’s Kitchen Lake, including scuba diving.

While they described Alternative A as most closely aligning to their preference in Refuge management if combined with an increase in support for public recreation, officials with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources offered several specific recommendations. Maintaining and improving existing recreational facilities should be one of the needs against which alternatives are measured, DNR officials said. Specific recommendations included:

Fish & Wildlife:

- Consolidate block timber management for forest interior species around Devil’s Kitchen and Little Grassy lakes in the areas south of Grassy Road.
- Increase development of moist-soil wetland units where possible in pastures and/or marginal crop fields.
- Control exotic vegetation and convert non-native pines to deciduous forest.
- Continue warm, cool and cold-water fisheries management.
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Recreation:

- Consolidate marina services by private vendor to Playport area.
- Upgrade Route 13 (Images Marina) to a large boat ramp with expanded parking and upgrade other boat ramps, campgrounds and beaches.
- Allow regulated recreational power boating on Crab Orchard to continue with time and space zoning for water skiing and personal water craft.
- Continue to authorize the use of small outboard motors on Devil's Kitchen Lake.
- Maintain status of Refuge Youth Camps and, where possible, tie their mission to environmental education as an outreach effort.
- Expand public hunting opportunities where possible.

Industry:

- Maintain the status quo with existing tenants and encourage new prospects to locate in industrial parks associated with nearby cities.

Agriculture:

- Maintain 4,000 to 5,000 acres of agriculture in crop fields, as winter food for Canada geese and other wildlife.
- Evaluate fields and pastures for levels of goose use to determine suitability for conversion to wetlands, grasslands or woodlands.
- Evaluate all pastures with low goose use levels for conversion from cool season grasses to native warm season grasses to benefit grassland birds.
- Add warm season grass borders to many crop fields.

Alternative B

Some Alternative B supporters cited a desire to ensure the best interests of the land and wildlife while still valuing the area's importance to recreation, industry and agriculture. The Refuge's importance in drawing tourism to the area was cited as the reason other writers supported it. Some writers advocated bolstering recreational facilities in the northwest corner of the Refuge to make it a landmark destination facility. Supporters said that exchanging recreational land would allow the National Wildlife Refuge System to focus on its mission while a more appropriate institution focused on improving recreational amenities. The alternative was also seen as a means of decreasing habitat fragmentation. Other supporters suggested that a land exchange would result in higher rates, which would ultimately provide more money for improvement of recreational facilities.

Variations on Alternative B: Variations suggested on this alternative included allowing current boating activities on Crab Orchard Lake and Little Grassy Lake but eliminating the use of jet skis. Increased dangers, liability, noise and water pollution were cited by one writer as reasons to eliminate jet skis.

One writer supports a land exchange with Southern Illinois University, but with or without an exchange would like to pursue leasing a marina for sailboats on Crab Orchard Lake.

Alternative C

Alternative C's supporters said that emphasizing open land habitats would satisfy the Refuge's recreation purpose as much as possible given the Service's budget and would expand wildlife-dependent recreation.

Variations on Alternative C: Interest was expressed in creating habitat to benefit wild turkeys, which was described as a patchwork of cropland, grassland and woodlands with timber in various stages of succession. Another writer identified Alternative C as his first choice, but suggested rolling alternatives A and C into one alternative.

Alternative D

Individuals supporting Alternative D said that enhancing forest habitat would benefit songbirds by reducing habitat fragmentation and would provide more recreational opportunities for hikers, bikers and horseback riders. Some people cited the length of time it takes to establish a forest and the difficulty in replacing forest.

Variation on Alternative D: Some individuals were in overall support of Alternative D, but voiced a preference for recreation as it now exists.

Comments About a Particular Aspect of Certain Alternatives

Phasing Out Group Camps

Four group camps are located on the Refuge. The camps include two church camps, a Boy Scout camp and Camp Cedar Point, which is operated by the Girl Scouts. Alternative C, Open Land Management, proposes to phase out the group camps. Alternative A would maintain group camping as it is currently allowed, and alternatives B and D would manage group camps with an emphasis on the National Wildlife Refuge System.

A number of people, including former and current Girl Scouts and Scout leaders, wrote in favor of maintaining the current management of group camps, specifically Camp Cedar Point. Some writers noted that the camp has been a positive partnership for the Refuge because it accomplishes Girl Scout goals for girls who participate in the program and it plants the seeds of a conservation ethic in young minds. In the same vein, some writers said that without exposing children and teenagers to nature, there won't be anyone who cares about the land in the future.

A camper noted that she has learned basic life skills at Camp Cedar Point that her non-camping classmates have not gained, and Scout leaders said that Camp Cedar Point is one of the best outdoor camps in the area. Another troop leader said that Camp Cedar Point is the only wildlife experience that some girls get as children.

The events of September 11 were also noted in letters supporting continuation of group camps. Youth are now facing more uncertainty than ever, one writer said, and they need the environment as an oasis and retreat.

Eliminating Motorboats from Devils Kitchen Lake

Alternatives B, C and D propose to eliminate the use of gas motors on Devil's Kitchen Lake.

Some writers suggested that eliminating motor boats on Devil's Kitchen Lake is unnecessary because the existing 10-horse power limit and existing boat traffic do not discourage canoe use on the lake. Submerged trees and stumps create more hazards for canoeists than existing boat use, some people said. Some people expressed concern that banning gas motors would effectively prohibit older people from fishing the lake. Some writers said that the lake is too big to fish in a non-motorized craft, and others shared stories of being stuck on a submerged tree and needing a motor to break free. Some writers noted that they are paying fees to use Refuge lakes and said that they do not want to see any restrictions in public use. Others said that the lake's water quality belies the need to eliminate motors. On the other hand, the opinion was also expressed that the changes proposed would improve fishing on Devil's Kitchen Lake.

Land Exchange

Alternative B proposes exchanging land in the developed northwest corner of the Refuge with Southern Illinois University. The area under consideration is directly adjacent to New Route 13 and includes two marinas, parking lots, picnic areas and a campground.

Some individuals expressed reservations about Southern Illinois University's ability to successfully manage recreation. Others interpreted an exchange with SIU as a decrease in recreational facilities and activities and opposed it on that basis. Individuals in favor of a land exchange said that recreational activities are not appropriate to the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and also constitute a drain on budgets and staff availability. Supporters of a land exchange said that developed uses would be more appropriately managed by local park districts and State of Illinois programs.

Restatement of Issues

Jet skis: Some respondents expressed a desire to have jet skis prohibited on the Refuge, saying that they are loud, they pollute the lake, they interfere with other watercraft and they interfere with waterfowl. Boating should be restricted to canoes, kayaks, sailboats, pontoons and fishing boats, and a "somewhat lower" horse-power limit should be initiated, according to some writers. In addition to jet skis, some people said that all-terrain vehicles and "motorized thrill craft" in general damage streams, creeks, and thin soil areas, and they are hard to police. One writer described himself as liking jet skis, but said he does not support their use on Refuge lakes because the people using them are often "arrogant and reckless."

Sailboats: Some people wrote to voice their desire for increased sailboat access to Crab Orchard Lake. Some writers described enhancing accommodations for sailboats on Crab Orchard Lake as a significant issue. Sailing was advocated as a low-impact approach to expanding public use opportunities for wildlife observation and photography and environmental education in aquatic, shoreline, and near-shore flora and fauna. Other people advocated allowing sailing, saying that sail boats do not generate fuel and oil residue, are quiet, and do not contribute to shoreline erosion. Sailing was also advocated as a means of exposing people to the refuge in a way that makes it a special and lasting experience.

Removal of Pines and Logging: Some people expressed an opinion against logging at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge, saying that heavy equipment would damage sensitive soils and have a deleterious impact on water quality. The potential impact on wildlife was also cited by a writer opposing logging on the Refuge. Other people supported the existence of pine stands on the Refuge because they provide habitat for a variety of bird species but also supported planting hardwoods in areas where pines have already been removed. Other writers said they supported thinning pine stands and replacing them with hardwoods.

Fee Program: Some writers said that the fee program should be discontinued because people are already paying for the Refuge via taxes. The fee program was described as an “unfair system” that limited access to the Refuge for people with low incomes. Other people suggested that the Refuge recognize a current duck stamp as a valid pass for entering the Refuge. One writer said that the fee system has discouraged him from going to the Refuge and questioned whether it has reduced public support for the Refuge.

Comments on Variations of Alternatives:

Some of the people who wrote letters or e-mail to support a specific alternative suggested significant variations to the management alternatives..

One writer who supported Alternative A suggested that the Fish and Wildlife Service work with the National Park Service to “...coordinate something really ‘great’ in education, recreation and environmental needs” for Crab Orchard Lake and the entire Refuge.

Writers suggested a compromise on the issue of eliminating motors from Devil’s Kitchen Lake by eliminating motors only on the southern half of the lake. People would still have the opportunity to boat and fish with motors on the northern half of the lake, while eliminating motors on the southern half would expand the wilderness area. It was also suggested that new public use activities such as scuba diving and snorkeling would introduce an innovative approach to wildlife observation in a fresh water community.

Some writers did not identify a specific alternative they would like to see pursued, but did discuss particular management concerns. Some people said that the Refuge over emphasizes game species at the expense of non-game species and native plants. Writers also encouraged the Refuge to increase efforts to inventory and assess the status of federal and state-listed threatened and endangered species within the Refuge and to encourage habitat supporting those species.